

CHAPTER THREE

Early Days and Strange Contacts

797
197 MANY small hordes came to Yirrkala within a few weeks of our arrival and set up their camps on the beach. I found I had a lot to learn from them before presuming to teach. Curiosity had lured them to the station where this white family had come with the unheard-of intention of living permanently in their country and growing food where food had never been found. Some of them had not met a white man, and seeing a white woman was a new experience for most of them.

Their habits, customs and beliefs were separated from ours by a thousand generations, and they could not understand our equipment and tools; agricultural implements, fencing wire, carpenter's and blacksmith's tools were of no greater significance to them than our small wireless set for receiving and transmitting messages to our nearest neighbours one hundred and fifty miles away. They understood that this wireless enabled us to communicate with the outside world, and as a test case Marupla asked me to 'wireless' and tell his friends to come in from Caledon Bay! A few days later there was rumour of a killing in a distant horde, and when I asked how the news had come, one man nonchalantly remarked: 'Oh, might be wireless.'

[757] Medicines were readily accepted, the most popular being a cough mixture with a liquorice and golden syrup base, which was always in demand for cuts and bruises! Patented tablets made their usual appeal, and doubtless influenced most aches and pains, at least by suggestion.

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264 We offered the Yulengor employment in clearing the

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ground and cultivating and planting crops. Payment in the form of flour and tobacco was made for all work done, and the principle of 'no work—no pay' was strictly adhered to. Agriculture was an economic necessity in assisting them to develop from a nomadic existence to a communal life. Pay was later in the form of food grown on the station; in this way they became self-supporting, and profits were automatically returned to them. 797 464 ●

When the time came for planting it seemed ridiculous to the nomad to bury good sweet-potatoes instead of eating them, for the relationship between seed and harvest had not occurred to them. About three months later, when the first crops were still immature I was surprised one morning to find that they had been scratched out and eaten. Two months of hard clearing and three months of cultivating had gone overnight. Disappointing as it was, the people could hardly be blamed, for it was against all their experience to leave good food, to mature. For centuries, stray coconuts had drifted from the East Indies to the shores of Arnhem Land, but none took root, for this unexpected harvest from the sea was eagerly seized and eaten. Nomads consume all edible food at hand, and in bush life rarely wait for yams, fruit, and berries to ripen. Food is scarce, and they instinctively make the most of anything they find. I have seen them bring loads of popular cashew nuts into camp, stripping the trees and smashing their wide shady branches in an effort to get the last of the crop, and then gorge the nuts through day and night till all have been eaten. On rare occasions a number of turtle are caught, and though some could be kept alive and eaten later, they are killed at once, and the camp feasts and sleeps intermittently till the catch is finished. 797 185 [241] [261] [262]

We tried to explain that cows and goats were kept for their milk and not for meat, but nomads found it hard to sit and tend them day by day and yard them at night, when each [231]